

TWO RECENT RECORDS OF SOUTHERN ELEPHANT SEAL (*MIROUNGA LEONINA*) BIRTHS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

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ABSTRACT

Southern Elephant Seals (*Mirounga leonina* L.) are infrequent visitors to the Australian mainland and the birth of pups at such locations is a rare event. This paper describes the first two recorded births in Western Australia and reviews the seven others from mainland Australia recorded in historic times.

INTRODUCTION

The Southern Elephant Seal (*Mirounga leonina* L.) has a circum-polar distribution centred on sub-antarctic islands of the Southern Ocean and is an infrequent visitor to Australian coastal waters. Up until the early 1800s there were colonies on King Island and New Year Island in Bass Strait (Micco 1971), although Peron did not expressly mention the presence of pups. These colonies were eliminated by sealers, and since then only seven births from Tasmania and the Australian mainland have been recorded (Table 1).

This paper describes two more births, both from Western Australia, the first such breeding records for this State.

Record No. 1

On 15 October 1996 local fishermen reported seeing a large pinniped swimming in the shallows at Wylie Bay (33° 52' S., 121° 53' E.), 5 km east of Esperance, Western Australia. The animal was identified as an adult female

M. leonina. It was next seen hauled out on beach-washed seaweed on the sandy beach at Wylie Bay early on 16 October with a new born pup, later that afternoon found dead. This carcase was recovered and is now lodged in the Western Australian Museum (WAM #M48667).

The cow remained at Wylie Bay for another two days before leaving the beach. An adult of similar size (presumably the same animal) was then sighted around the Esperance harbour during the next 4–5 days.

Record No. 2

On 12 November 1996 a tourist reported seeing a large pinniped and what appeared to be a pup on a sandy beach, leading up to high sandstone cliffs at the northern end of Epineux Bay (26° 20' S., 113° 18' E.), 24 km south-east of Steep Point, Western Australia. This location is on a very remote part of the west coast, but a local resident was able to provide photographs to assist

with the identification of the animals. Examination of the photographs confirmed that the animals were an adult female *M. leonina* and a pup of only a few days of age.

Frequent checks were made of the cow and pup during the next five weeks. The pup grew rapidly and had weaned and completed its first moult by 13 December (age approx. 34 days), when both the cow and pup went to sea.

DISCUSSION

These two records are the only known breeding records from Western Australia in historic times. The birth date for the pup from Wylie Bay falls within the range of birth dates (early Sept. – late Oct.) recorded for *M. leonina* at Macquarie Island (Carrick *et al.* 1962).

The birth date at Epineux Bay was slightly later, but not the latest date recorded for a birth along the Australian coastline (see Table 1).

The time between the approximate birth date and departure to sea for the Epineux Bay pup (*ca.* 34 days) is considerably shorter than the normal 9–10 weeks recorded for this species. They are usually weaned at three weeks, then moult before leaving the beach at 9–10 weeks of age. However, this was of a similar duration to that recorded by Tyson (1977) for a pup born near Diana's Basin, Tasmania in 1975 (25 days).

The presence of *M. leonina* at these latitudes is unusual, although an adult male was recorded farther north at Tulki Bay (22° 02'S., 113° 54'E.), Ningaloo in 1995. Including the two records

Table 1. Published records of births of *Mirounga leonina* in Australia during historical times. (? = fate unknown).

Birth Date	Location	Reference	Fate of pup to weaning
Nov. 1958	Strahan, Tas. (42°09'S., 145°19'E.)	Davies (1963)	Died
Late 1968	Near Golden Beach, Vic. (38°13'S., 147°24'E.)	Warneke (1995)	?
9 Oct. 1975	Diana's Basin, Tasmania (41°23'S., 148°17'E.)	Tyson (1977)	Survived
12 Jan. 1977	Maatsuyker Is, Tas. (43°39'S., 146°17'E.)	Pemberton and Skira (1989)	?
Oct. 1986	Wright Bay, SA (37°03'S., 139°45'E.)	Robinson and Dennis (1988)	?
9 Oct. 1988	Maatsuyker Is, Tas. (43°39'S., 146°17'E.)	Pemberton and Skira (1989)	?
Sept. 1994	Mouth of Elliot River, Vic. (38°46'S., 143°40'E.)	Warneke (1995)	?
15 Oct. 1996	Wylie Bay, WA (33°52'S., 121°53'E.)	This paper	Died
12 Nov. 1996	Epineux Bay, WA (26°20'S., 113°18'E.)	This paper	Survived

presented here, a total of six adult *M. leonina* (five female, one male) have been recorded along the Western Australian coastline during the period 1980–1996 (Mawson and Coughran unpubl.).

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